

THE FIVE SOLAS

—THE DOCTRINES THAT
DEFINED THE REFORMATION —

“When we think of the Reformation we think naturally of the five great theses of that movement: *sola Scriptura, solus Christus, sola gratia, sola fide, and soli deo gloria*. Those doctrines are exactly what we need to rediscover.”¹

❖ JAMES MONTGOMERY BOICE

Not since the day of the apostles has there been such a spiritual impact upon the church and, conversely, upon the world as the Protestant Reformation of the sixteenth century. In the annals of church history, this pivotal movement stands as the greatest establishment of biblical truth the world has witnessed since the days of the apostles and the birth of the church. Not since the first century had there been a theological revolution like *this*. It is not exaggeration to say that the Reformation was ‘the spiritual explosion that rocked the world.’

At the heart of this great movement, there stood five statements—really, five *declarations*—that defined what this ‘revival of religion’ was about. These five proclamations forged the very essence of the Reformation and undergirded the advance of the gospel on the European continent, as well as in Scotland and England. These five statements of biblical truth were known as the *solas* of the Reformation.

Each of these declarations—*sola Scriptura, solus Christus, sola gratia, sola fide, and soli Deo gloria*—begins with the Latin word *sola*, meaning “alone.” This definitive word—*sola*—asserted the absolute exclusivity of each of these truths. The Reformation was all about this small, but pivotal word, “alone.” These were the doctrines that defined this history-altering movement.

SOLA SCRIPTURA

The first *sola* is *sola Scriptura*, which means “Scripture alone.” This foundational truth was the first cornerstone to be laid in the Reformation. The other four *solas*—and every other belief in the church for that matter—must be brought into right alignment with this master truth. Every

¹James Montgomery Boice, *Whatever Happened to the Gospel of Grace?* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2001), 65-66.

truth must square with this *sola*. Only once this foundation stone is laid can everything else be properly built. It is the most important part of any building—and of any spiritual movement.

Known as “the formal principle,” *sola Scriptura* gives “form” to everything else, to all beliefs and convictions. This established that the Scripture *alone* is the spiritual authority in the life of the church. God rules His people through His inspired Word, and nothing else. Not Scripture *and* the pope. Not Scripture *and* church traditions. Not Scripture *and* church councils. Not Scripture *and* worldly wisdom. Not Scripture *and* anything else. But Scripture *alone*. The Reformers returned *ad fontes*—back to the source—and drew from the deep wells of Scripture to establish their beliefs. Nothing was clearer in the Reformation than this, that the Scripture *alone* is the sole authority.

The most memorable statement of this *sola* was found in the heroic words of Martin Luther as he stood at the Diet of Worms and addressed the head of the Holy Roman Empire, and the gathered princes and bishops. Luther proclaimed: “Unless I am convicted by Scripture and plain reason—I do not accept the authority of popes and councils, for they have contradicted each other—my conscience is captive to the Word of God.” The gauntlet had been laid. Scripture *alone* was authoritative and binding.

SOLUS CHRISTUS

The second assertion was *solus Christus*, meaning “Christ alone.” This next *sola* established and expounded what is the very heart of the saving gospel, namely, Jesus Christ Himself. By *solus Christus*, the Reformers were stating that salvation is found exclusively in Christ Himself. The gospel *is* the person and work of Jesus Christ. It is Christ and Him crucified. It is Christ born of a virgin, who lived a sinless life, died a vicarious death for sinners, was buried and raised on the third day, and ascended to heaven to the right hand of God. Salvation from sin is found in this crucified, but crowned, Christ.

For the Reformers, this was the sum and substance of the gospel. Deliverance from the penalty and power of sin was accomplished *solely* by the sin-bearing death of Christ. Christ slain for sinners *is* the gospel. The substitutionary death of Christ upon the cross is the *only* way of salvation of lost, hell-bound sinners. Not Christ *and* any religious system. Not Christ *and* any religious ritual. Not Christ *and* the sacraments. Rather, salvation is found *entirely* in Christ. The one and only source of salvation is found in Jesus Christ *alone*.

SOLA GRATIA

The third *sola* was *sola gratia*, which means “grace alone.” The Reformers affirmed that salvation was *entirely* by divine grace. Not grace *and* human works. No human merit can be added to divine grace. That is, saving grace was for those who had no claim upon it. Divine grace was for sinners who do *not* deserve it. Salvation is freely offered to those who possess no inherent goodness within themselves by which to acquire it.

Sola gratia means that the salvation God has provided is a free gift. It is extended to undeserving sinners, who are spiritually bankrupt. It is given to those without any spiritual capital by which to secure its infinite riches. Simply put, salvation is not a reward for the

righteous, but a gift for the guilty.

Moreover, the Reformers believed that *saving* grace is *sovereign* grace. Before the foundation of the world, they held, God chose His elect to be the recipients of His saving grace. Salvation is rooted and grounded in the sovereign will of God in eternity past. God then commissioned Christ to purchase the redemption of these elect sinners. Further, the Holy Spirit was sent to draw to Christ and regenerate these same chosen and redeemed ones. This is the essence of *sola gratia*.

SOLA FIDE

The fourth *sola* is *sola fide*, which translated means “faith alone.” The Reformers affirmed the clear teaching of Scripture, that salvation is received by faith *alone*. This was called “the material principal,” because it involves the very *matter* of what a person must do to be saved. Faith *alone* in Christ *alone* is the substance, or matter, of the saving gospel. Not faith *and* church membership. Not faith *and* baptism. Not faith *and* good works. But simply, faith *alone*.

Martin Luther called this truth—the doctrine of justification by faith—“the master and prince, the lord, the ruler, the judge over all kinds of doctrines.” By this, *sola fide* is the chief cornerstone of the gospel. Every other doctrine in the Word of God must be brought into right alignment to this impregnable truth. Justification by faith, Luther believed, has a ruling affect upon all other teaching. Further, the master expositor of Geneva, John Calvin, identified justification by faith as “the main hinge on which salvation turns.” The Reformers were unwavering in this. *Sola fide* was at the very heart of their biblical preaching during the Reformation of the sixteenth century.

SOLI DEO GLORIA

Finally, the fifth *sola*—*soli Deo Gloria*—is the victorious banner that flies high over the first four. This last *sola* means “to the glory to God alone.” It is the capstone of the Reformation, the highest pinnacle of all theology. It is the highest apex of the entire Bible. It is the bright shining sun around which the entire universe rotates. The grandest purpose in salvation is for the praise of the glory of God’s grace. God saves sinners in order that His supreme greatness might be vividly put on display. He pardons that He might be praised.

Whenever the first four *solas* are rightly entrenched, *soli Deo gloria* is firmly anchored in the life of the church. Only when salvation is rightly understood—that is, based upon Scripture *alone*, in Christ *alone*, by grace *alone*, and through faith *alone*—will it lead to the glory of God *alone*. But any departure from these first four *solas* inevitably results in a departure from this final *sola*. To add anything to the authority of Scripture alone—such as the church’s tradition or the world’s wisdom—robs God of His glory. To introduce anything to the exclusivity of salvation in Christ alone defames God and His glory. To inject anything to salvation being by grace alone through faith alone dishonors the glory of God.

Only when the first four *solas* are firmly established—*sola Scriptura*, *solus Christus*, *sola gratia*, *sola fide*—will the compass will always point upward to God. This was the very essence of the Reformation. These five truths laid the immovable foundation upon which this religious

movement in the sixteenth century was firmly built. It was these five assertions that rocked this world for the glory of God.

A REDISCOVERY OF THE *SOLAS*

Charles Haddon Spurgeon has said: “A Reformation is as much needed now as in Luther’s day, and by God’s grace we shall have it, if we trust in Him and publish His truth....We want such a one as Martin Luther to rise from his tomb. If Martin were now to visit our so-called reformed churches, he would say with all his holy boldness “I was not half a reformer when I was alive before, now I will make a thorough work of it.”

If we are to see a new Reformation in our day, it will require a return to these same history-altering doctrines that once shocked the church. May God once again restore such a commitment in His church. And may it begin with you.

Soli Deo Gloria.